"The Third Day He Rose Again From the Dead"
Matthew 27:62 - 28:10
April 6, 1969
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The President of the United States was there; DeGaulle, Thieu, Trudeau, U Thant; wealth and power, the Secret Service and the Marine Corps Bank; Cadillac limousines dispensing captains of finance and industry; even the Gothic sanctuary of the National Cathedral spoke of grandeur and might. And in the midst of it all - in the midst of this unique concentration of what men perceive as powerful, death, in stark, brute reality, wrote the final page in the story of a beloved man's life. The contrast was striking. There was nothing in all the world these men, and the power they represented, could do about the last terrible foe.

There was , of course, a majesty and dignity to all of it - as there always is when a great man dies. And yet Mrs. Eisenhower felt the same feelings, no more, no less, than millions upon millions of other widows; the same oppressive, helpless weakness best expressed by an inaudible sigh.

And in the midst of it all, a man in a black robe stood and in a straightforward, unadorned manner, read the words - the most glorious - the most optimistic - the most hopeful words words in the vocabulary of man. . . "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

That is very much the manner in which the New Testament presented the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is all very straightforward, without hesitation or awkward embarrassment. The New Testament doesn't argue about it or plead for its truth. It doesn't mumble, as if the resurrection could be tacked on to the end of Jesus' life, to be accepted or ignored depending on how the individual feels about these things. It simply announces it: "Now is Christ risen from the dead. Who can separate us from the love of God. Not life, not death, not anything. I am the resurrection and the life."

In the midst of the sophisticated pomp of a state funeral the words were read- in the same way that the words are articulated in the midst of all humanity: "The third day he rose again." But for most contemporary Christians it is not enough: there must be more.

We are, I believe, very much like those chief priests and pharisees who went to Pilate after the crucifixion and requested measures to secure the tomb. They were, the scripture said, afraid that his disciples would steal the body and then tell the people that he had risen. They were afraid of that, to be sure. But don't yuu think their words belie their real fear? Don't you think they were omore than a little afraid that he might rise up from that grave. Don't you think, underneath it all, they were desparately afraid of that and that what the New Testament is describing here is a group of frightened men wanting to do everything possible to protect themselves from that kind of miracle.

I think we are like that. Of course, the stakes are a little different. And yet we continue to insist on a life made safe from miracles. We continue to insist on rational explanations for everything in order to shut out the possibility of a miracle.

And so on this day all the traditional "explanations: of the resurrection are dragged out and placed on parade. "It's the language of poetry - but it really didn't happen. Jesus' teaching are immortal and will live forever. His loving spirit was resurrected in the lives of his disciples and he lives in people who call him Lord." Or - "he was drugged by thewine they gave him to drink, or in a coma from his wounds, or unconscious from pain, and in the coolness of the tomb he revived."

All the so-called "proofs" of the resurrection are discussed today and the effect of them is to make the event understandable and to protect us from a miracle. It's a little like discovering that you're sitting om a bomb, and acting immediately to defuse it. The bomb is still there, but now you may go about your business without

worrying about the possibility that it may detonate.

Contrary to the views held by many people the resurrection of Jesus Christ was like a bomb that exploded in the midst of the disciples. It has been argued that they wanted it to happen so badly that they ended up deluding themselves. But isn't it odd that the New Testament should describe the exact opposite? Isn't it odd that not one person directly involved expected it to happen? They had been with him for three years, and had heard him predict that he would suffer and die and after three days rise up from his grave. And apparently the only ones who took that promise seriously were the men who crucified him. The disciples didn't expect it: they fled as quickly as they could and hid behind a barred door. Joseph of Arimithea - the only one courageous enough to be identified with him after his humiliation certainly didn't expect it. He prepared the tomb he had constructed for himself and had the body wrapped tightly in linen. The women who came to the garden in the first light of dawn obviously expected to find him dead, because they had brought with them the proper spices to anoint the body.

No one really expected it to happen. When they were confronted with it; when they first heard the news that the tomb was empty they reacted with cynical doubt. When several of them told the others what they had seen, they didn't believe it. Thomas held out until he could see and feel. When the rumor persisted their response was not joy and happiness, but fear and terror. No one really expected it to happen.

The disciples of Jesus believed that he had risen from the dead only after they had explored every other possibility - only when it forced itself in upon them - only after it had exploded in their midst like a bomb.

We are concerned with explanations and it's interesting that the New Testament which can be very meticulous in other places, doesn't even bother to tell how it happened. No story was constructed to describe that dramatic moment when the stone rolled away and the lifeless form stood up. The early writers were content to refrain from doing the impossible - explaining the unexplainable. And so they simply proclaimed it - straightforward - without awkward hesitation - Jesus Christ is Risen.

For the Church of Jesus Christ Easter is a celebration of a reality, and not a pathetic yearly attempt to convince ourselves that the resurrection really happened. The New Testament was written on the basis of that conviction. The church was founded and lives by this faith. - And it is no more appropriate to spend our time arguing today than it would be to spend the Fourth of July arguing that we really are independent of Great Britain.

It is a celebration, and that is best done in hymn and prayer and worship. On Easter day we are called to celebrate the reality which gives life and meaning to our fellowship every Sunday of the year.

But what does it mean to live within the reality of the resurrection - not only in April - but also in July and November? It means, of course, far more than I am able to discuss this morning. But I would suggest two directions.

It means, first, the ultimate victory of truth and goodness. Now, that is a fine sounding phrase that probably means very little to anyone here. So let's examine a little more closely.

We are inclined to think about the resurrection first in terms of personal immortality. That is, part of it, of course, but primarily what is at stake is what kind of world we live in - who is ultimately going to win the battle - the forces of good - or the forces of evil? The really terrible thing about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was that it cut the bottom out of everything. What kind of a world is it, in which this could take place. If a kind and gentle man, an absolutely honest man who did nothing but good, can be executed as a criminal nothing much makes sense.

That, I believe, was the post-crucifixion despair of the disciples. Over the period of three years life had gradually come to make sense. The way to real life was - in loving - helping - suffering and serving. And now this. Now he was dead. All the sham and hypocricy and evil he had stood against had won the day. That, I believe, was the very depths of despair.

And, I believe, you and I know something about it because we have experienced it, too. Truth and goodness and honesty seem very weak - almost helpless in the face of life's brute realities. The world seems to smile indulgently at the totally honest man: unselfishness and sacrifice are not honored so much as they are exploited. And so we grow cynical and call it "being realistic."

Or perhaps we've lost someone very dear to us: someone who meant all the world to us: someone for whom we lived to please and to love. And suddenly nothing makes sense any more. Life has no meaning.

Or perhaps we've committed ourselves to some noble cause -- equal rights, or the relief of poverty --, and time and time again seen our cause sacrificed because of expediency. Perhaps we've discovered that the policies of our government, or the motives of our elected representatives are not blessed with a pristine purity, but rather reflect economic and political convenience. And so we throw up our hands in despair. "What's the use!"

We are, of course, treading very lightly on the most important, most profound question ever asked: "What kind of a world is it? Who will win the battle?"

The message of Easter is that the good and gentle man rose up from his grave. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the gloriously good news that no matter who is winning today's skirmish, the decisive battle has already been won. There is an ultimate integrity and justice and goodness in God's creation and nothing can prevent its ultimate victory. Not communism or fascism -- or the rampant nihilism of our own day: not cancer or heart disease or tragic airplane crashes: not racism or bigotry or vested interests. Nothing. Jesus Christ is alive -- the battle is won. The universe is good - and things do make sense -- life is worth living no matter what is going on at the moment.

From his prison cell in Nazi Germany, facing certain execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents: "We need not the ars moriendi, the art of dying, but the resurrection of Christ to invigorate and cleanse the world today... what a tremendous difference it would make if a few people really believed and acted upon that. To live in the light of the resurrection - that is the meaning of Easter." (p. 154, Letters and Papers from Prison)

That is the first direction. The second is that in a very personal sense we may know that life is the victor over death. Death did not hold Jesus Christ. He got up and walked away. Celebrating that fact, St. Paul wrote some of the happiest words I know. To the Romans he posed the question: "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" and answered -- "Nothing -- nothing in life, not even death." Writing to the Corinthians he concluded a lengthy dissertation on the resurrection with these good words: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Those words stand alone: but I think George Frederick Handel best understood them when he put them to music in his famous oratorio, "The Messiah". The melody is lilting, almost giddy. The question is asked almost mockingly. He caught the essence of the resurrection: and that is that the sting and victory of the grave are simply no more.

We mourn the death of others -- our own loved ones - Dwight Eisenhower: we mourn a little every time we are confronted with anyone's death, because we are reminded of our own. From time immemorial men have been afraid. The strongest instinct within us is to deny and fear and battle against death.

Dylan Thomas said it well:

"Do not go gentle into the night
Rage, rage against the dimming of the light..."

Easter means, simply - put aside your fear. Death is not your conqueror. The last spoken about you will not be death: in fact, you have already been spoken for by your risen Lord.

I'm uncomfortable with specific descriptions of eternal life. But a British theologian has said it beautifully and well: "The unfinished tasks we have tried to do, the dreams and hopes and aspirations after which we have striven, the relationships we have vainly sought to perfect and complete, the experiences that have lifted us up and laid us low, moulded us and made us - all these will not be lost or left behind, but will be the notes by which we render harmony to the music of the City of God." (Neville Clark, Interpreting the Resurrection. p. 114)

That is what Easter means, and it is good news indeed.

On this day let us sing it, rejoice in it, celebrate it. Jesus Christ our Lord is Risen. And then let us live - gloriously in security and freedom. Christ is Risen!

Amen.